

The material culture of Roman literacy

Hella Eckardt

Voices from the ancient world can only reach us through written texts. Classicists have long studied these texts and the history of their transmission. In the previous article Eleanor Dickey talks about the ancient classroom, where children in the Roman empire learned their letters. Here Hella Eckardt looks at the evidence for the objects and materials actually used for day-to-day writing in the Roman world.

Archaeologists studying the technology of Roman literacy generally divide it into materials used to write on wax, and those employed to write in ink.

Writing on wax

The Romans used rectangular panels of wood, often linked into a folding pair, with a shallow recess on one side that could be filled with wax. These tablets were often made of wood like silver fir, and only tend to survive in waterlogged conditions. The wax was usually coloured black with soot, and was applied using a spatula (a tool with an iron blade, which could be heated to make it easier to manipulate the wax), like the one shown below. The wax was written on using a stylus, an iron or bronze tool with a sharp pointed end. As the wax has usually vanished, it is only possible to read the text where the stylus scratched the underlying wood. From this limited evidence it appears that wooden wax tablets were often used for legal texts such as wills and official records.

Writing in ink

Romans used pens and ink to write quick notes on papyrus or pottery sherds, on wood leaves like those found in the fort at Vindolanda near Hadrian's Wall, and in papyrus scrolls for finished books.

Roman pens were usually made of reed (*calamus*) cut to shape with a knife, rather than the feather quill employed from the early medieval period. These pens are rarely found, because like all organic material they rot away. Arid conditions in Egypt allow occasional survivals which can help us understand how pen shapes influenced ancient writing practices.

Roman black ink was most commonly made from soot suspended in a solution of

glue or gum Arabic (acacia tree sap). Sometimes iron-gall ink, made from the oak apples caused by gall wasps, was used instead. Red ink could be used for special text like headings, and sometimes magical spells.

Romans kept their ink in ink-wells, made from clay, copper-alloy, or sometimes glass or silver. The way these were used seems to have changed over time and between different regions. For example, while ink-wells were used from the first to the fourth century A.D., their popularity declined after the second century. Double ink-wells (with one pot for red and one for black ink) are most common in the early period, as are ink-wells with handles. These kinds of observations provide an insight into ancient writing practice: perhaps portability was less important in the later empire, for example? Perhaps only professional writers used double ink-wells? Most ink-wells are quite simple objects, but high status ink-wells had inlaid silver, bronze, or even gold decoration, usually in a running scroll or vine design on the lid. The image above shows a decorated ink-well from Nijmegen in the Netherlands. Another good example of such a lid comes from the Drapers Gardens site in London. It was probably a prestigious import from Italy, meant to show off wealth and sophistication as well as for practical use.

Writing equipment and ancient identities

To understand who used writing equipment during the Roman period, archaeologists study the contexts of finds. Now that osteological (human bone) analysis can tell us more about individuals in burials, these sites in particular are giving us some interesting insights into who could

write in the Roman world. For example, a first-century A.D. grave in Vindonissa (Switzerland) contained an ink-well (shown on p.14), two scalpels, and a pair of tweezers – the equipment of a doctor. We might assume that doctors in the Roman world were usually men, but osteological analysis of the cremation instead identified the remains of a woman aged 18–25 years, buried with a three-year-old child.

Some children were buried with writing equipment of the sort that they might have used in the classrooms discussed above by Eleanor Dickey. Some of the children buried with writing equipment were only ten years old, and presumably the mourners put these objects into the grave to show both what the child would have aspired to in life and to celebrate and commemorate his or her initial achievements.

Hella Eckardt is an archaeologist at the University of Reading. Her recent British-Academy-funded project looked at over 400 examples of Roman ink-wells. More information about writing equipment in the Roman world can be found in her recent book, Writing power in the Roman world: literacies and material culture. A catalogue of metal ink-wells from across the Roman empire can be seen at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.5284/1039969>.